

REVIEW GUIDE FOR CONSTITUTIONAL CONFLICTS OF THE 17TH CENTURY

Europe in the 17th Century

In early 17th century England, the first two Stuart kings, James I and Charles I, sought to establish an absolute monarchy and to enforce their views on religion. These policies led to a revolt by Parliament, with the support of the Puritans, against Charles I. The English Civil War of the 1640's ended with the victory of Parliament and the execution of the King.

During the period of the Commonwealth and Protectorate, the English conducted an unsuccessful experiment in republican government. In 1660, the monarchy was restored. The troublesome issues of the relationship between king and Parliament and the nature of the English church had not been resolved, however, and further conflict produced the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This revolution established a constitutional monarchy and confirmed the Church of England as the country's established church. During the 18th century, Parliament clearly established its ascendancy over the crown.

Thus the seventeenth century can be viewed as an age of constitutional conflicts. England and France serve as prototypical models of the power struggles between monarch and nobility that led to vastly different outcomes in each country- constitutionalism in England, and absolutism in France.

ENGLAND

In England, two revolutions Puritan and Glorious-resulted from clashes between king and Parliament. Parliament was a medieval English institution that sought to defend the ancient liberties that noblemen had wrested earlier from kings.

Upon the death of the childless Elizabeth I, her cousin James I (1603-1625), a Stuart, inherited the throne. He boldly asserted the theory of divine-right monarchy, proclaiming himself to be God's legal representative on earth. Puritans in Parliament, who comprised many gentry members of the House of Commons, opposed James. His extravagant spending and his intolerance toward the Puritans were among the reasons for their antagonism toward him. Each body, Crown and Commons, asserted rights challenged by the other. Parliament held the purse strings and refused to relinquish control, even forcing Charles I (1625-1649), desperate for money, to accept its Petition of Right with its writ of habeas corpus.

Civil War

The issue came to a head in 1640, when revolution broke out between the aristocracy and the Anglican church hierarchy and the New Model Army led by Oliver Cromwell (1559-1658), a Puritan member of Parliament belonging to the gentry. In the ensuing civil war, the forces of Cromwell defeated the king, and Charles I was beheaded. He had arbitrarily forced loans to finance a Scottish war; he had tried to arrest members of Parliament while in session; and he had ignored the principles in the 1628 Petition of Right, which he had earlier signed. After Pride's Purge, Rump Parliament convicted him of treason.

Cromwell ruled sternly during the Interregnum. The revolutions had produced extremists, like the Diggers and Levellers, who called for the abolition of private ownership and the extension of the franchise. Cromwell's military dictatorship and his Puritanical rule collapsed with his death and was quickly followed by the restoration of the Stuart kings, who were Catholic sympathizers, in 1660. As a result, Parliament passed the Test Act in 1673, requiring all officeholders to be members of the Church of England. Still, Charles II (1680- 1685) plotted with Louis XIV to convert England back to Catholicism. James II (1685-1688) proved no wiser. He appointed Catholics to high government positions. Such affront led leading British citizens, both Whigs and Tories, to join forces and drive James from the throne. William of Orange (1672-1702) and Mary, his Protestant wife and the daughter of James II, accepted the invitation tendered by British leaders to ascend the throne upon signing the English Bill of Rights. The political theory of John Locke(1632-1704), expressed in his Second Treatise on Government won out over the theory expressed in Leviathan by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679).

Creation of a Constitutional Monarchy

The document guaranteed individual rights of life, liberty, and property for the aristocratic oligarchy against the absolute power of kings. It undermined divine right theory and signaled a victory for Parliament. By the end of the seventeenth century, England was established as a Protestant state, controlled by gentry burghers and noble lords with power over the king.

FRANCE

Cardinal Richelieu, the chief minister of King Louis XIII raised the authority of the French monarchy to new heights and increased France's power in Europe. Cardinal Mazarin continued Richelieu's work during the early years of the reign of Louis XIV, further reducing the power of the nobility. After Louis XIV's personal rule began in 1661, the French absolute monarchy stood at the height of its power both in France and Europe. The wars of Louis XIV proved costly, however, and left France a burden of debt that would lead the French monarchy to collapse in the eighteenth century (The French Revolution).

In France, the final outcome was different from that of England. King Louis XIV (1643-1715) consolidated absolute power and brooked no challenge to his authority. He can be viewed as a master state builder who weakened the rival power of the nobility, strengthened the allied power of the bourgeoisie, and thus emerged as the absolute king described in Bossuet's Politics Drawn from the Words of Holy Scripture.

The Rule of Louis XIV

Louis inherited the throne at the age of five and, soon after, witnessed an attempt by the nobility to overthrow him. Cardinal Mazarin, his able minister, gathered military forces and quelled the rebellion, known as the Fronde. Louis allegedly was never to forget the quick escape of his family. Upon independent rule in 1660, at age twenty-three, he devised policies to prevent further uprisings. Following Cardinal Richelieu's strategies, (curb the power of the nobles, suppress the protestants and humble the House of Austria) he appointed able members of the bourgeoisie to the positions of intendant, the chief agent of the king in the local areas of France. In addition, the bourgeoisie benefited from the mercantilist policies of Louis's financial minister Colbert (1619-1683), the son of a draper. Colbert provided subsidies for the domestic production of silk, improved harbors and roads, and abolished internal tolls that had benefited the nobles.

If the political power of the nobility was waning, their social status nevertheless remained high. Louis constructed a lavish palace at Versailles (Baroque style). Invitations to the court were prized, although the activities there were mainly ritualistic services to the king.

Revocation of the Edict of Nantes

In keeping the nobility under his control at Versailles, Louis XIV emasculated a significant sector of rival contenders to his power. He sought to establish "one king, one faith, and one law." With this aim, he revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Persecuted Calvinists fled France and journeyed to England, Prussia, Holland, and the New World. They brought their skills as artisans to the new countries that welcomed their creativity and diligence.

By the end of the seventeenth century, Louis emerged as chief architect over a nation owing its first allegiance to his absolute rule and supporting his wars of conquest that culminated in the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1713) and the Peace of Utrecht (1713). Even the art and literature of the period known as French classicism (writers such as Moliere, Racine and Corneille), the official style of Louis's court, exhibited the qualities of discipline and control.

Absolute monarchy as it existed in France was in large measure a reflection of the policies of Louis XIV. The same was true for Prussia and Russia under their respective rulers Frederick William, the Great Elector, and Peter the Great.

PRUSSIA

Background: Beginning in 1415 the Hohenzollern family became the electors of Brandenburg. The family gradually increased their holdings until by the late 1600's they were second only to the Hapsburgs in square mileage of territory.

Frederick William (1640-1688), known as the "Great Elector," infused military values into an authoritarian Prussian society. His power stemmed from a standing army and an efficient bureaucracy. Commoners could hold important positions in his civil government, but only the Prussian nobility, or Junkers, made up the officer caste of his army. Historically, the nobility in their estates controlled finances. But the Great Elector ignored these political rights and without Junker approval collected taxes to build up his army. The nobility was exempt from taxes, socially privileged, and in full control over peasants residing on their land. Taxes fell on the towns, and the nobility, benefiting from the freedom from financial obligations, sided with their Hohenzollern king.

FREDERICK I r. 1688-1713

The maverick of the Hohenzollerns, Frederick did not focus his attention on administrative or military ventures. Rather he became a patron of the arts and learning. He was a man who enjoyed living in luxury. His sole political move was to support Leopold I (Holy Roman Emperor) in the War of Spanish Succession. In reward for this support, Leopold allowed him to assume the title of King of Prussia. The title was passed to his son upon his death in 1713.

FREDERICK WILLIAM I r. 1713-1740

While his father had lived in luxury, Frederick practiced extreme austerity. Under his guidance Prussia's income increased. He was known as the "Sergeant King" and increased Prussia's army until it was the 3rd largest in all Europe (even though Prussia was 13th in size). Army officers became privileged and Junker sons eagerly tried to join. Although he was a clear militarist, he sought to avoid war. Under him the army became a sign of Prussian power rather than an instrument of aggression.

FREDERICK THE GREAT

A later key figure in Prussian history was Frederick the Great (1740-1786). Although artistically inclined and rebellious as a youth, in adulthood he adopted the militaristic values of his predecessors. In 1740, when the Austrian ruler Maria Theresa (1740-1780) inherited the dynastic Hapsburg possessions, Frederick invaded the duchy of Silesia in violation of an earlier law-the Pragmatic Sanction, which held that the lands of Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary were to remain intact and could pass to a female heir. Maria Theresa lost the battle; Frederick the Great won, and doubled his state's population to six million in the War of the Austrian Succession. Frederick's victory earned him an alignment of the military powers of Austria, France, Russia, and Sweden against his army for the Seven Years' War, fought on Prussian soil. In the Peace of Paris (1763), Frederick was able to keep Silesia and his power status, but he concluded that "the acquisitions which one makes by the pen are always preferable to those made by the sword." He turned his attention to rebuilding the economy and encouraging education.

RUSSIA – RUSSIAN CZARS

IVAN THE GREAT 1462-1505

The Slavic Grand Duke of Moscow, he ended nearly 200 years of Mongol domination of his dukedom. From then on he worked at extending his territories, subduing nobles, and attaining absolute power.

IVAN THE TERRIBLE 1533-1584

Ivan earned his nickname for his great acts of cruelty directed toward all those with whom he disagreed. He became the first ruler to assume the title Czar of all Russia.

MICHAEL ROMANOV 1613

Following Ivan Russia was plagued with foreign invasions and civil wars as the nobles tried to seize the throne for themselves. Finally, in 1613 an assembly of nobles chose Michael as the new czar. For the next 300 years the Romanov family ruled in Russia.

PETER THE GREAT 1682-1725

Russia's Peter the Great (1682-1725), had thirty-five years of war during his forty-three-year reign. Service in the Russian army was compulsory and for life. Peter set up schools to train his officers and bureaucrats drawn from the nobility. Peasants served in the regular standing army or worked in factories and mines.

Peter's efforts centered on directing the westernization of Russian society. He insisted on the adoption of Western dress and manners by nobles, gentry, and the city population generally. And to glorify his state, he had the city of St. Petersburg built on drained swampland. It was located on the Baltic coast, facing the West. Nobles were required to build their palaces there and live under Peter's watchful eye. He:

1. created a strong army loyal to him
 2. ruthlessly crushed revolts of the nobles
 3. extended his control to the Russian Church
 4. wanted to model Russia after the western world
 5. created a window to the west
 6. published first Russian newspaper
 7. imported foreign technicians
 8. established schools to train bureaucrats
 9. defeated Sweden in the Great Northern War
 10. lost to the Ottoman Turks in an effort to gain access to the Mediterranean
- In the end he widened the gap between the educated upper class and the exploited peasants who were serfs and paid excessive taxes.

The defeat of Sweden in the Great Northern War had enabled Peter to obtain this territory along the Baltic coast. His war with the Ottoman Turks for access to the Mediterranean, however, was unsuccessful.

In spite of reforms in rebuilding the army, creating a navy, and stimulating exploration, trade, and industry, Peter remained an autocratic czar who widened the gap between the educated upper-class Russians and the exploited peasants who bore the heavy burden of taxation in an onerous system of serfdom.

CATHERINE THE GREAT 1762-1796

She was the German wife of Russian Czar Peter III. She deposed her husband (had him killed), and ruled Russia. She extended Russia's territories southward:

In wars against the Turks she gained the north coast of the Black Sea and gained the right for Russian ships to use the Dardanelles to the Mediterranean Sea westward.

Catherine joined with Austria and Prussia in three partitions that completely eliminated independent Poland.

In building on Peter's accomplishments she ruled an empire consisting of Slavics, Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, and Baltic and Asian peoples. She made 18th century Russia into a major European power.

Economically she continued the affairs of Peter and reduced internal barriers to trade.

From 1773-75 Pugachev led a Cossack serf revolt in the Volga region. She reorganized the government into 50 provinces. The 1785 Charter of Nobility recognized the rights and privileges of the nobility including exemption from taxes and military services. It also gave the nobility complete control over their lands and serfs.

Of the enlightened despots Catherine is the least deserving of the title. Her position depended on the support of the nobility with whom she carried favor. Peter the Great was far more enlightened.